

# **RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE**

**Dialogue**

**- Andrew Mishkin -**

Prior to the widespread use of smartphones and social media websites, the Los Angeles streets were the stage of a conversation regarding the role of everyday citizens in the politics of the city. Nowadays, Twitter and Facebook “timelines” are constant scenes of discussion and debate; back in 1992, however, the only feasible way to direct media coverage to an issue was to resort to violence and destruction. Many things have changed since the LA Riots of 1992, like the way we bring attention to a pressing matter; still, citizens resort to violence when all else fails, and when they do, a direct link between the past and the present is accessed. In order to predict the future for situations like this, one must understand this link between the Rodney King Riots and the debates we see in the media today.

The Rodney King Riots of 1992 were not only distinctive in their happening, but also trendsetting on a national scale. Whereas civil rights protests in the past had been spearheaded by carefully selected leaders, the LA Riots sprouted from the actions of Rodney King, a then insignificant man who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Protests began regarding the decision not to indict the officers who had beaten down King and King became famous—not as a hero, but a symbol. Unlike Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., Rodney King was nothing more than a figure. He became a “hero” by chance rather than choice. Similarly, today’s national figureheads are, more often than not, just symbols. Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and, most recently, Walter Scott have fueled civil rights discussion as symbols, rather than leaders. Each time one of these “unintentional heroes” gains media attention, conversation with the past is reopened and dialogue amongst Angelenos is, once again, sparked.

The LA Riots were incredibly influential in altering the way we, as Americans, deal with the issues we find important. The Rodney King Riots did not happen by chance. In fact, according to an article by *The Nation* dated April 30, 2012, over 1,400 police officers were investigated on grounds of excessive force between 1986 and 1990. More significantly, only 1 percent of these officers were prosecuted. It was only after citizens saw their justice system failing that they decided to take violent action. Contrarily, citizens nowadays resort to—no, opt for—violence immediately. The LA Riots of 1992 taught Americans that their complaints and investigations were futile. Though many protests, like the recent ones in South Carolina, remain peaceful, people are for more eager to move straight to violence and destruction to satiate their complaints. One such example is the protests in Ferguson, Missouri that brought destruction to the once peaceful American community. Thus, the dialogue between the time of the Rodney King Riots and the present is constantly being refreshed. This is key in understanding the nature of our discussion of issues in the future. One can safely predict that, in the future, we will see countless more violent protests regarding police brutality.

The Riots did more than just bring violence to American cities: they increased the role of everyday Americans in national discussions. Besides the aforementioned violent protestors and “unintentional heroes,” the Riots gave power to the regular, insignificant general public. The beating of Rodney King, which served as the catalyst for the violence, was made accessible to the public through the twelve-minute video footage filmed by George Holliday. Holliday became one of the first to create a “viral video,” and his legacy was unbeknownst at the time. After this amateur cinematographer gained fame, it became clear that anyone and everyone could participate in the discussion.

Nowadays, with advanced technology like smartphones and digital cameras, anyone and everyone *is* involved in the discussion. Just recently, Feidin Santana filmed the interaction between police officer Michael T. Slager and civilian Walter Scott. This footage was pivotal in the case against Slager, who was accused of using excessive force against Scott. But it doesn't stop there! You do not even need a camera to be part of the action. Avid Twitter users use "hashtags" and "tweets" to express their support or disapproval of an issue. The subject can then begin trending, for thousands on Twitter to observe. This tool of social media has become incredibly potent in directing attention to an issue, be it before or after violence ensues. Without the events that transpired in the Rodney King beating, it is unlikely citizens would play such a significant role in affecting the outcome of important political decisions. My community, referring to both civilians in Los Angeles and my peers who utilize social media, is constantly awake and participating in the debates regarding current events.

In short, the dialogue between the past and present is constantly shifting. As we observe the past, we learn what does and does not work in order to make the movements in which we engage more successful. Then we apply what we have discovered to our endeavors in the future. Thus it is of absolute importance that we maintain our dialogue with the past in order to be successful in the future. It can be concluded without doubt that the LA Riots of 1992 were influential in shaping the role of public figures, civilian action, and ordinary citizens in the way we address our issues on a community-based and national scale.